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SUBJECT: CHALLENGES TO PEACE IN MINDANAO

REF: A. MANILA 631

[1](#)B. MANILA 530

[1](#)C. MANILA 472

[1](#)D. MANILA 5637

[1](#)E. 04 MANILA 5943

[1](#)1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified. Please handle accordingly.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary: Despite official optimism over a final GRP-MILF peace agreement by the end of 2006, disputes over land and natural resources, clan conflicts (locally called "rido"), and tensions between Muslims and Christians will remain important undercurrents and challenges to peace and development in Mindanao. Diffusing such tensions will be a major challenge for the GRP-MILF peace process during the years ahead, requiring careful governance and significant amounts of foreign assistance. End Summary.

Prospects for peace, but...

[1](#)3. (SBU) The tenth round of GRP-MILF talks recently concluded on an upbeat note in Malaysia, with GRP and MILF officials alike expressing optimism that they could reach a peace agreement by the end of 2006 (reftels). Knowledgeable observers nonetheless continue to point to unhappiness throughout the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) over perceived lack of a full and fair implementation of the 1996 accord between the GRP and the Moro National Liberation Front as a caution for undue optimism with the GRP-MILF accord.

...competition over natural resources

[1](#)4. (SBU) Based on incomplete data and unconfirmed reports, the Philippines may have untapped mineral wealth worth between US\$ 840 billion and US\$ 1 trillion. (The U.S. Geological Survey hopes soon to conduct a more comprehensive survey of minerals, with funding from the GRP.) A special advisor on the GRP-MILF Peace Process in the Office of the President recently described Mindanao in particular as "a treasure trove" of mineral resources, including gold, copper, nickel, manganese, chromite, silver, lead, zinc, and iron ore. According to data from the GRP Mines and Geosciences Bureau, up to 70 per cent of the Philippines' mineral resources may be in Mindanao. Interest has grown significantly since a December 2004 decision by the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the Mining Act.

Companies that are up to 100 per cent foreign owned may now pursue investments in large-scale exploration and development of minerals, oil, and gas. As of early 2006, there were 23 mining projects nationwide. Multinational firms are already eyeing areas in Mindanao for possible projects.

15. (SBU) The Department of Energy and Natural Resources (DENR) has already identified natural gas and oil deposits in three areas of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago: the Cotabato Basin; the Davao-Agusan Basin; and, an area straddling Tawi-Tawi and Sulu. The Cotabato Basin, notably, includes the 288,000 hectare Liguasan Marsh, straddling the provinces of Maguindanao, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudurat.

This swamp/marsh -- which is an officially declared bird sanctuary and game refuge -- remains an important MILF stronghold, home to an estimated 280,000 Muslims, and an area where members of the terrorist Jemaah Islamiya (JI) have historically conducted training and sought refuge.

16. (SBU) The Philippines National Oil Company (PNOC) began exploring for oil and natural gas in the Liguasan Marsh area in 1994 under Geophysical Survey and Exploration Contract (GSEC) 73, which covered all of Maguindanao, North Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani, Davao, and Bukidnon provinces of Mindanao. Malaysia's national oil company, Petronas, partnered with the PNOC. By the late 1990's, they had located natural gas and/or oil in five sites, including Datu Piang (Dulawan) and Sultan Sa Barongis in Maguindanao and Lambayong in Sultan Kudarat. According to the PNOC, the estimated natural gas deposits in Sultan Sa Barongis alone would be enough to fuel a 60MW combined cycle power plant for 20 years. The PNOC had hoped to use this gas to support the power requirements of Mindanao as well as for industrial applications. However, the PNOC and Petronas

MANILA 00000740 002 OF 004

suspended operations in the Liguasan Marsh area due to threats from the MILF and extortion by local mayors and political warlords.

17. (SBU) Additionally, competing land ownership claims will make exploitation of these resources difficult. The clan of former Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) Governor Zacaria Candao has already staked a claim to 40 percent of this land, while other clans -- including the Mangudadatus and Pendatuns -- have claimed at least 50 per cent ownership.

MILF Vice-Chairman of Political Affairs Ghazali Jafaar has referred to the Liguasan Marsh as a "legacy from our forefathers" and stated that the "Bangsamoro" people (Filipino Muslims) would not part with their lands in the marsh. The MILF has created the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA) to lead, manage, and determine developmental efforts, including in the Liguasan Marsh. Separately, the Maguindanao tribe -- the predominant indigenous and largely Muslim ethnic group living in and around the Liguasan Marsh -- considers the marsh as part of its own ancestral domain. The Maguindanao-based clan of the deceased Salipada K. Pendatun -- the first Muslim to serve as a general in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) -- has also claimed ownership over the entire Liguasan Marsh by virtue of an original land title. Though Pendatun's daughter/legal heir, Bai Monera Pendatun, has said that the Pendatun clan is open to sharing the marsh with others, she has opposed any amendment to the law that would allow titling of lands within the marsh. The head of the Alamada clan, Rebecca Dilagalan Alamada Buan, has separately claimed 14,000 hectares in North Cotabato Province, near the borders of Maguindanao and Lanao Del Sur. Meanwhile, the Ampatuan clan, led by Maguindanao Governor Andal Ampatuan and ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan, politically dominate the region, also including most of the mayors of the 11 municipalities of Maguindanao, eight municipalities of North Cotabato, and one municipality of Sultan Kudarat that encompass the Liguasan Marsh.

18. (SBU) The 1987 Constitution specifies that "all lands of the public domain, waters, minerals, coal, petroleum, and

other mineral oils, all forces of potential energy, fisheries, forests or timber, wildlife, flora and fauna, and other natural resources are owned by the State" and that all "exploitation, development, and utilization of natural resources shall be under the full control and supervision of the State." According to the Expanded Organic Act for the ARMM (RA 9054), the GRP -- rather than the Bangsamoro people -- explicitly controls all of the natural resources in the Liguasan Marsh. However, the Indigenous Peoples Right Act (IPRA) provided that indigenous peoples within and along the Liguasan Marsh could claim the land and natural resources in the marsh as part of their ancestral domain.

Infighting among Muslim clans (1): Requiem for a sultan

¶19. (SBU) On January 11, unidentified gunmen shot Amir Bin Muhammad Baraguir -- who claimed to be a descendant of Sultan Shariff Muhammad Kabungsuan and the three hereditary ruling families of Maguindanao, Buayan, and Kabuntalan -- outside his home in Sultan Kudurat. Baraguir's murder came less than a month after his December 12, 2005, enthronement as the 25th Sultan of Maguindanao during traditional ceremonies in Cotabato City. Installing Baraguir as the new Sultan were his elder-benefactors from central Mindanao, the Zamboanga Peninsula, and South Cotabato-Sultan Kudurat-Sarangani-General Santos City (Socksargen).

¶10. (SBU) Baraguir was a moderate Muslim who had opposed the spread of Wahabbi influences in Mindanao. During his weekly community-based radio program, Baraguir was critical of foreign trained religious leaders who sought to impose practices akin to those of the Taliban in Afghanistan. He also wrote columns for a daily newspaper in which he criticized extremist Muslim groups. As the newly enthroned Sultan of Maguindanao, Baraguir vowed to pursue the right of self-government for the Muslims of Mindanao under the United Nations Charter and international agreements. He also stressed the importance of the Sultanate as a governing institution.

¶11. (SBU) The murder of Baraguir raised fears of a rido involving hereditary royal families in Mindanao. The Sultan of Sulu and North Borneo, Sharif Ibrahim Ajibul Mohammad Pulalun, appealed to the Baraguir clan to refrain from

MANILA 00000740 003 OF 004

violence, and requested assistance from Malacanang in diffusing tensions surrounding Baraguir's brutal slaying. ARMM Police Superintendent Akmad Mamalinta formed "Task Force Sultan" to investigate the killing, while MILF officials -- denying any involvement in the slaying -- have speculated that the murder could be part of a "family feud" within the area of Sultan Kudurat controlled by the Baraguir and Mastura clans.

Infighting among Muslim clans (2): Anatomy of a rido

¶12. (SBU) On January 25, an armed conflict between two MILF groups erupted in Barangay Kaya Kaya in Datu Abdullah Sangki Municipality of Maguindanao, when MILF Brigade Commander Said Pakiladatu attempted to survey a tract of land that he claimed to own. Blocking the way were members of the MILF 105th Base Command under Brigade Commander Itom Ampatuan, the nephew of Maguindanao Governor Ampatuan. When AFP troops and para-military groups loyal to Governor Ampatuan entered the area, skirmishes spread to Mamasapano, Shariff Aguak, Ampatuan, Datu Unsay, and Datu Piang, displacing thousands of civilians in the process (ref C).

¶13. (SBU) Prior to the outbreak of these armed clashes, tensions had already been escalating in Datu Unsay, Maguindanao, over the MILF's opposition to a local government

road rehabilitation project that apparently had not been coordinated with the MILF leadership. On January 21, an estimated 100 MILF members attempted to stop construction of this road, claiming that it would traverse a MILF camp in the area. To protest the MILF's disruption of this road project, eight mayors (all relatives of Governor Ampatuan) sent a petition to the Malaysian-led International Monitoring Team (IMT) and to Malacanang. In response, the IMT set up a temporary office in Guindulungan, supported by the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP) and the NGO "Ceasefire Watch." During a meeting between Governor Ampatuan and OAPAP's Jesus Gestuveo "Jess" Dureza, Ampatuan agreed to a ceasefire to allow the IMT and CCCH to stabilize the situation on the ground.

¶14. (SBU) Underlying these latest armed clashes was a long-standing rido between the Ampatuan and Candao clans. During the 2001 Maguindanao gubernatorial race between Ampatuan and former ARMM governor Zacaria Candao, tensions between the two clans escalated into violence and bloodshed. After losing the election to Ampatuan, Candao filed an unsuccessful protest with the Commission on Elections accusing Ampatuan of electoral fraud. On December 24, 2002, Mayor Saudi Ampatuan (Ampatuan's eldest son) of Datu Piang Municipality was killed in a bomb explosion. Among the suspects in Saudi's murder were MILF members and "Zacaria Candao's man" -- Said Pakiladatu-- whom Saudi Ampatuan had defeated in the 2001 mayoral race. Pakiladatu's defeat also triggered yet another rido, between the Pakiladatu clan and the Tayuan clan, over the Tayuans' support of the Ampatuans during the elections.

¶15. (SBU) Less than five weeks after the murder of Saudi Ampatuan, Zacaria Candao's brother, Abdulkadir "Peiping" Candao, was assassinated in Cotabato City by unidentified assailants. Over the past three years, there have sporadically been other outbreaks of the Ampatuan/Candao rido, which local observers assess as one of the most serious threats to lasting peace in the Maguindanao region.

Muslim-Christian tensions

¶16. (SBU) Muslim-Christian land disputes overshadow religious tensions as potential spoilers of a GRP-MILF peace agreement. Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat -- a wealthy Christian, a former member of Congress, and son of a long-standing mayor -- remains one of the most vocal opponents of any peace agreement that would expand the existing territorial boundaries of the ARMM and infringe upon the land and other rights of resident Christians. Subsequent to the mid-October 2005 press leak regarding the creation of a "Bangsamoro" juridical entity that would include the Zamboanga peninsula (ref D), Lobregat said at a press conference that "this is a sellout and we will not allow Mindanao to be dismembered, and we must act swiftly before it is too late."

MANILA 00000740 004 OF 004

¶17. (SBU) In a letter dated February 13, 2006, to Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, Jesus "Jess" Dureza, Mayor Lobregat stated that "our firm position remains and will always be the same, i.e., that the City of Zamboanga should be excluded from the coverage of the proposed "Bangsamoro Homeland" and that the Bangsamoro juridical entity should not have any jurisdiction over the city, including its barangays." In specific reference to ancestral domain, Lobregat also noted in his letter to Dureza that "our position remains the same, i.e, we are not aware of any barangay or any part of Zamboanga City which may be considered as "ancestral domain" as the term is referred to in documents covering the negotiations by and between the GRP and MILF panels." (Note: Zamboanga City is a Local Government Unit (LGU) composed of 98 barangays. End Note.)

¶18. (SBU) Archbishop of Zamboanga Carmelo Morelos is concerned about rising Muslim-Christian tensions over the potential creation of a Bangsamoro juridical entity that would include the Zamboanga peninsula. In an effort to alleviate concerns, the GRP Peace Panel is planning to hold an open forum on the GRP-MILF peace process on February 22 at Western Mindanao University in Zamboanga.

¶19. (SBU) There has been some violence involving the Christian and Muslim communities. At least six people have been killed -- including a suspected MILF member and his wife -- in clashes between Muslims and Christians in Tupi, South Cotabato beginning on January 29. To avoid being caught in a crossfire, hundreds of residents have fled from their homes. The AFP and PNP have imposed a curfew to quell the violence. While the exact cause of this armed conflict remains unclear, GRP officials commented that the fighting is over land, not religious differences.

Comment

¶20. (SBU) As difficult as negotiation of the GRP-MILF peace accord has been, its eventual implementation will be even trickier, as competing interests jockey for power, resources, and influence. The IMT has proven its effectiveness in diffusing minor conflicts, but achieving peace in Muslim Mindanao will require improved law enforcement and justice systems, anti-corruption measures, good governance, education/training programs, fair distribution of resources, and increased economic opportunities. Much work on the ground -- and significant quantities of well designed foreign assistance -- will be essential to the lasting success or failure of the ever more likely GRP-MILF accord.

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